

Review: Oakland Ballet's motley 'Oaklandesque' emphasizes diverse character of the city

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In a high-energy if imperfect night of turf dancing, graffiti decor, jazz, dance theater, funk, postmodern dance and live avant-garde percussion, Oakland Ballet Friday night qualified as "Oaklandesque." Opening a two-day program of that title at the Malonga Casquelord Theater, artistic director Graham Lustig, a British expat, may have grasped a keener sense of the pulse of the complex East Bay city than either of his predecessors.

Lustig pulled together local choreographers, who themselves found inspiration from local musicians like Larry Graham of Sly and the Family Stone and Grand Central Station, jazz legend Earl Fatha Hines, cellist Jean Jeanrenaud, Rayshawn "Looney" Thompson and Garion "Noh- Justice" Morgan. Guest performers from Axis Dance Company, meanwhile, work out of the arts center upstairs.

The night opened with Sonya Delwaide's sinuously witty "Rocky Road," named for the ice cream invented in Oakland in 1929 and set to the hot jazz of Hines. Hines changed perceptions of jazz piano through his use of complex percussive meters, and Delwaide neither let herself be controlled by nor dominated the rhythmic drive of tunes like "That's Plenty" and "Riding and Jiving".

Instead, she chose to ride Hines' swinging exuberance as a wave. Costumed in black moray tops and pants with black or orange side insets, her dancers strutted, marched, wiggled and flew in a zone between jazz, ballet and theater. Voice-over dialogue spoke of catastrophe and faith that Axis' dancers embodied with a rolling wheelchair and daring physicality.

Robert Moses' "Tip," which is vernacular for a way of feeling or being, was set to Graham's soul/funk guitar (think the opening riff on Seinfeld). To begin, the dancers gathered center stage in a pack under shadowy red light and then exploded. What ensued was a series of partnerings and counterpoints that emphasized the sexiness of the heavy bass beat, the flying phrases, and Graham's capacity to bend the notes as far backward as Moses asked his men to bend the women. "Tip" was at its strongest when Moses created blocks of movement that spoke to the overall shape of the music, but the summery costumes by Christopher Dunn undermined the driving '70s intensity of the work.

Molissa Fenley's "Redwood Park" shifted attention toward the region's diffuse Asian aspect, with Jeanrenaud's Eastern-inflected composition for wooden percussion, drums and cymbal, played with dazzling precision by Anna Wray and Nava Dunkelmann, with Fenley's repeated use of extended martial-style lunges and upright stances echoing verticality of the redwoods. Originally designed for five men (Emily Kerr replaced an injured dancer), the work took inspiration from Fenley's long walks through the park, depicted by circuitous, switchback floor patterns and a sense of a landscape, both continuous and ever-changing.

Turf dancing stands for "taking up room on the floor" and is a street dance form spawned in Oakland by dancers wanting to memorialize their murdered friends and family. Lustig tried valiantly to fuse the grass roots idiom and ballet with live feed from the stage and the graffiti art of Samuel Renaissance, but the work seemed to be still forming -- neither street dance nor concert work. It didn't help that the costumes

looked pure '80s, with ballet dancers in mismatched ballet gear and skewed hats or that the gifted pair Morgan and Thompson, both of Turffeinz, never got to let loose. A worthy effort all the same, it points to Lustig's desire to be part of a movement to make ballet open its mind and doors and let in the new.

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